

## **Khmer Rouge survivor tells how painting saved his life**

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**July 1, 2009**

*One of only three remaining survivors of the Khmer Rouge's most notorious prison has testified how his life was saved because of his skill at painting.*

Over 14,000 men, women and children were sent to the S-21 torture centre, also known as Toul Sleng, housed in a disused Phnom Penh high school.

Only seven prisoners are known to have survived of whom only three are alive today. They have become the first victims of the Khmer Rouge to confront their persecutor in court as the commandant of S-21, known as Duch, goes on trial for crimes against humanity.

"I survived because I could paint exact portraits of Pol Pot," said Bou Meng, 68, referring to the Khmer Rouge leader described as "Brother Number One".

Bou Meng also painted other propaganda pictures, including attacks on the regime's enemies in neighbouring Vietnam. "I was ordered to paint a picture of Ho Chi Minh's head on the body of a dog," he testified.

Up to two million Cambodians were executed or died of starvation and overwork in little over three years of the Khmer Rouge's ultra-Maoist rule between 1975-79. It has taken 30 years of negotiation and procedural wrangling for the first trial of a senior commander to begin in a court jointly run by Cambodia and the United Nations.

Another witness, Bou May, was sent to S-21 with his wife in 1977.

"There is a question I would like to ask to Mr Kaing Guek Eav," he told the court, using Duch's full name.

"I want to know if he asked his subordinates to smash my wife at [S-21] or Choeung Ek [the so-called killing field where prisoners were executed] so I can collect her ashes to make her soul rest in peace."

Duch replied calmly: "I expect she was killed by my subordinates."

Duch (pronounced Doik) was a senior official but not one of the leaders of the regime.

Some leaders, including Pol Pot, have already died but the four most senior survivors are all in custody awaiting trial.

However they are in failing health and many observers fear that continuing delays effecting the court will make Duch the only man to stand trial for the Khmer Rouge's crimes. In that case the three S-21 survivors will be the only victims to have their day in court.